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The Working Mother

MARIE VALDES-DAPENA, M.D.

Every person who sees himself as a creature of God, is obliged to make the most of his (or her) capabilities whatever they may be — spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional. Yet, every human being is entirely distinctive and like no other. It is requisite then that each survey himself to determine his own attributes and from that knowledge construct a plan for living.

For the majority of women the course to fulfillment of self lies entirely within the bounds of home and family — in devotion to the duties of wife, mother and homemaker. There is no doubt that many women perform admirably in this area; that they achieve complete satisfaction for themselves and serve their families more than adequately by devoting all of their energies and interest to this one task.

For some other women that kind of life does not suffice. These are women who yearn to participate in the larger world outside, as well as the smaller warmer world of the home.

For a man who has this kind of need, there is no problem. He can devote himself to his profession morning, noon and night — even though he has a family, confident that his wife will attend to all of the family's physical needs. She will prepare the meals, see to the night feedings, pay the bills and call the plumber. For the married

woman and mother, however, in our society, the situation is quite different. If and when she feels the call to professional activity outside the home as teacher, doctor, lawyer, librarian or secretary she may never lay down her intimate attachment to the household for it is the essential nature of a woman to be maternal and to feel a great sense of responsibility for the intimate needs of her family. The working mother who may have not only the right and the privilege but possibly the obligation of expanding her horizons beyond the limits of her home must needs lead a double life and this is where the difficulty arises.

In this discussion we must assume, of course, that the woman who elects to lead these two lives simultaneously does so with the approval of her husband. If he did not approve, the resultant marital discord would naturally cancel out any and all of the benefits. We must also assume that she chooses to work not simply to avoid household duties or to be able to afford luxuries for herself and her children. The woman who functions successfully in this kind of double life, does so because her work away from home affords her, above all else, spiritual and intellectual satisfaction. And lastly, we must assume it can be done, that one woman can lead two lives at the same time.

I, myself, am willing to make this

assumption because I have seen this occur successfully with a number of my friends and acquaintances. These are thoughtful intelligent women who have given this important matter due consideration. They have concluded that for themselves this is a right and justifiable course of action. I have been watching them through the years and I see their homes remain stable and happy; their children are growing up well adjusted in an atmosphere of love and true devotion mingled with mutual respect.

There are two sides to the ledger for this kind of double life. There are the merits and the rewards of it on one hand, and the disadvantages on the other:

First and foremost on the positive side is the matter of *self-respect*. Surely the woman who looks at herself and sees there not only a good wife and mother but also an individual engaged in the development or continuation of a career of her own must be filled with an inestimably important sense of achievement. She enjoys the rare privilege of being satisfied that all of her faculties are in use and that she is an adult in a world of adults.

Next in importance is the fact that the working mother gains an extra dimension of *respect from her husband and her children*. They see in her not one condemned to cleaning, cooking and ironing but a second interesting grown-up in the household who performs those household chores and, goes forth to an outside world of her own each day where she thinks and acts

independently. To them — as well as to herself — she is an individual and not just part of the whole.

Thirdly, the woman who is active outside of her home as a volunteer worker, employee or executive is more likely to be and to remain an *interesting companion for her husband*. There is no doubt that there are plenty of women who, even though they are not so employed, continue to be interested and interesting through reading; but the woman who works has a built-in guarantee that her world will be larger than the four walls of her home.

The working mother has another important advantage and that is *freedom from resentment*. Since she is being afforded the privilege of conducting an interesting life of her own choosing, there is no place in her heart for feeling sorry for herself. She is not the martyr who has "given up all" to devote herself to the well being of her mate and her offspring — so that they can enjoy the good life. She is always aware, even when engaged in her housework that she can and will "get out — meet people — and accomplish things." She is not confined while her husband is at work and the children are in school. This factor alone can be most important for the psychological well-being of a woman.

Then there is the matter of *productivity* — making the most of one's talents. The challenge to the homemaker is not so great as to the woman who carries the burden of both home and career. The nature of human beings is such that they

are likely to rise to the occasion but not much above it. When there are many jobs to be done, a woman is likely to conduct herself more effectively per unit of time, to be better organized, to accomplish more each day than she would if there were not so much to be done. It is easy for a housewife in this day of modern conveniences to become lax and inefficient but the woman who must conduct her household as well as her profession is forced into greater self-discipline, organization and productivity.

The children of a working mother are probably more independent people, more self-reliant and more responsible than children of like age whose mothers stay at home with them. These children soon learn to do their own ironing and cooking and their share of cleaning. The situation is much like that in the old-fashioned pioneer family unit where each member of the household had to participate in this sort of function. It isn't just a matter of arbitrarily assigning certain chores to certain children; when mother isn't around to do some of these necessary things, the children automatically rise to the occasion and do it for themselves.

One important facet of the positive side of the ledger is *appreciation of one's own children* — of the blessing they represent. The woman who has been away from her children all day looks forward with great anticipation to being re-united with them again in the evening. Since the family is only together for relatively short periods of time the

pleasure of those moments is intensified; a woman becomes acutely conscious of the fact that she must make the most of the limited time she has to share with them.

Coming home in the evening, the working mother faces many accumulated household chores but not in the same frame of mind she might had she been shackled to them all day. A working mother cannot be bored. There is a certain *renewal of the spirit* that takes place almost magically as one goes from one type of occupation to another that is totally different.

Another advantage of having a career beyond that of homemaker is the fact that it affords a certain sense of *individuality* — a feeling that the woman is, of herself, a person with special abilities — not simply one part of the family who is. She has a place to work, be it ever so small, which belongs to her alone and reflects her own temperament. What comes from that place and that employment is her own product in which she may take her own pride.

Into the life of every human being there come tribulations and periods of anxiety. In time of *mental and emotional stress*, housework alone does not afford much relief since it occupies only the body and usually not the mind. A career, on the other hand, requires intellectual concentration lifting the troubled spirit up and out of its emotional turmoil — even if only temporarily. This kind of change obviously aids in attaining a balanced state of psychological well-being.

Lastly there is the matter of *income earned*. It is said that one of the leading causes of marital discord is money. Surely if a woman is contributing to the family income she can better appreciate the value of that money and more wisely dispense it. In addition, the very fact that she holds a paying position is in itself a form of insurance which she and her husband are purchasing. Should the father of the family die prematurely or be incapacitated, she will automatically have one substantial means of providing for the continuing support of their children and holding her family together.

ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE of the ledger are the disadvantages of a woman's employment outside the home.

Of prime importance here is the fact that a working mother is undoubtedly *missing something* — something lovely to behold and wonderful to share — contact with her children during the day. Who can describe how precious those moments are when you sit and rock your warm sleeping baby, nestled against you, breathing lightly on your neck. Particularly the first 5 years of a child's life are dear to any mother and, for this reason, many women who do decide to work away from home wait until their smallest children are of school age. Such a hiatus is likely to result in loss of continuity in the woman's career with loss of skill and efficiency but one thing must be weighed against the other in light of the individual situation.

In our society today, one of the leading drawbacks to a mother's employment is the matter of *household help*. Every working mother of my acquaintance is confronted by this almost insurmountable problem and many of those who do not pursue their careers have given up with this as one of the leading causes. In America today there are relatively few people who choose to do housework for wages. It is extremely difficult for a woman to find an adequate substitute for herself to care for the children and the house during the working day. As far as housekeeping is concerned the working mother usually ends up in a kind of compromise; there are always and inevitably some chores that she would like to do or to have done that are just never accomplished. The storage closet isn't housecleaned and the third floor hallway isn't polished but there isn't much that can be done about it. Her housekeeper hasn't done it and she, herself, has neither the time nor the energy left to do it.

Then there is the matter of *time*. For the working mother there is never enough of it; time for household management, time to help the children with their homework, time for mending and sewing on buttons, time for shopping, time for rest and relaxation. There simply are not enough hours in any day.

Fatigue is another drawback of this double life. The working mother is very often tired at night. She may well feel harrassed finding it difficult to keep up with her many responsibilities.

Lastly, there is the touchy subject of her career constituting a kind of *competition* with her husband. Certainly it would seem undesirable for her to be earning more money than he; but economics being what they are in this country, that would not be likely. The wise woman will manage somehow to see to it that her husband is always confident that his work is more important than hers; in addition, he will be assured that he himself is much more important to her than her career. She is first his wife and the mother of his children and secondly, a working woman.

She who leads this double life walks a tight rope, with danger of falling on both sides of her. She must be intent upon what she is doing and know why she is doing it at all times. She must act with a full sense of responsibility and a consciousness of all the problems involved.

[DR. VALDES-DAPENA, associate pathologist at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children, Philadelphia, received her M.D. from Temple University School of Medicine where she is now associate professor of pathology. She is married to Antonio M. Valdes-Dapena, M.D. and they are the parents of eleven children.]

Tony's Spiritual Tidbit...

Editor's Note: The following are spiritual thoughts of Anthony C. Brancato, M.D. of Philadelphia, a member of the staff of St. Agnes Hospital in Philadelphia. Dr. Brancato is an otolaryngologist. He was the editor of the bi-monthly news-letter sent to the members of the St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Physicians' Guild of Philadelphia. In each news-letter Dr. Brancato included a spiritual message. The following I consider his best.

GINO G. PAPOLA, M.D., Associate Editor

THE INFINITE HUMILITY OF GOD

The angelic world was created instantaneously — not through procreation, but through a single and unique act of God's will when He willed that the angelic orders were to partake in the happiness He wanted all creatures to share. Immediately on the dawn of their existence there was engendered in the minds of all the angels a cognizance of the spontaneity of creation. Blessed with highly gifted intelligence, and being pure and without defects, the angels made a quick inventory of themselves and came to a quick realization of the laws of causality. They were not, and now they were! They knew through their natural intelligence that God preceded them and that they owed Him their volitional adoration as a sign of gratitude. How long God permitted them to be in this state of contentment and complacency before He tested them, no one knows. But God was not to grant them heaven and the Beatific Vision without their merit. Without effort on their part, they had become

possessors of a pure image and likeness of God, the purity of which transcended in degree and quality that which was later to be bestowed on man. Since they were of a higher order of intelligence than man, their test had to be instantaneous.

An acknowledgment of dependency, a simple act of humility, was demanded of them. Theologians have surmised that, perhaps, the angels were presented with the image of our Blessed Lord in the form of crucified man, and were asked to adore Him. One of the highest angels, the bearer of light — Lucifer as he was called — felt it to be below his dignity to worship God in this debased form, as one willing to undergo humiliation and suffering. Lucifer refused, desiring in this refusal not to be greater than God — for this he knew to be impossible — but to be at least equal. He persuaded others to refuse, thus causing the downfall of a whole host of angels, and becoming the bearer of darkness and evil.

God's humility — which certain angels refused to acknowledge — consisted of assuming the defects of man, the very defects that most men try to avoid: suffering, abandonment, derision, scorn, mockery, false accusation, crucifixion, death! Indeed, God's humility extended even further. Not content with these signs of love, He willed to assume even the form of inanimate matter, so as to seem in the eyes of men to be nothing more than